



DISA Races to Implement Human Capital Initiatives

Dikeita Eley



Although clichés are, well, cliché, more times than not, they represent fundamental truths. Spouting trite expressions such as “people are our most valuable resource” can lead organizations to realize the basic values they express, and can well be the impetus for human capital initiatives. It’s definitely the inspiration for the Defense Information Systems Agency’s aggressive and award-winning human capital programs.

Eley works in DISA’s Corporate Communications Division.

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“We do, as an agency from a leadership standpoint, put a high premium on the people and taking care of the people. If you invest the time and energy into the programs to take care of your people, it’s going to have a direct impact on the quality of the workforce that you have and in your ability to get your mission done,” said Jack Penkoske, director of manpower, personnel, and security at DISA.

Impact, indeed. DISA has received much recognition for its people programs. DISA was presented the 2007 Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Workforce Development Gold Award and also received the 2007 Human Capital Management for Defense Award in two categories. One of the awards was for DISA’s leadership programs and the other for its student programs. Furthermore, DISA received the 2007 Telework Exchange Award, an award for one of the agency’s most-noted people programs: the telework program.

A Growing Telework Program

DISA seeks to be the telework forerunner for the federal government. The agency permits regular and recurring telework up to three days a week with supervisor approval. DISA also reimburses teleworking employees up to \$25 per month for a high-speed Internet connection.

Even with such a progressive initiative as DISA’s telework program, Penkoske believes there is still room for improvement.

“I still don’t think we are where we need to be on telework. We keep trying to make sure we focus on productivity as

one of the biggest reasons for doing it. If people can be as productive or even more productive on telework, then we should expand [the program].”

Telework is more than a tool to enhance productivity. It is a major strategy to aggressively attack the challenges in recruitment and retention that DISA faces as it moves its headquarters in phases during 2010 and 2011 to Fort George G. Meade, Md., in accordance with the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) legislation. Of the 2,493 civilian positions moving to Fort Meade, approximately 1,745 of the incumbents in these positions—70 percent of the DISA civilian workforce—currently live in Virginia. And while the shortest driving distance from DISA headquarters to Fort Meade is only 30 miles in distance, it would translate into an additional 2.5 hours in commute times for most Virginia employees. That creates additional challenges in the area of DISA workforce retention.

Student Programs

In addition to telework, DISA’s student programs—the Career Development Intern Program and the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP)—will be highly used to cushion the possible losses DISA faces with the upcoming move.

“Our intern program is a cornerstone of the agency because we really believe we have to continue to bring new talent into [our workforce]. We have over 400 active interns in our intern program and over 250 college co-ops [SCEP students],” said Penkoske.

DISA’s Intern Program is a three-year training program that targets high-caliber recent college graduates and offers them full-time permanent employment with the agency. Interns receive on-the-job training, are assigned mentors, and are given an educational allowance to continue their education while completing the requirements of the program. Interns have the opportunity for non-competitive promotion up to GS-13 for employees in the engineer/computer science career series at select locations and to GS-12 for all other employees.

At DISA, with the majority of the positions being in the technical series, there’s a constant need to fill those positions.

“About 70 to 75 percent of our workforce is either in the professional or technical series. It’ll probably continue to grow. [Through the intern program,] we’re bringing in engineers, scientists, IT specialists, and telecom specialists at the entry level and then training them over a three-year program,” said Penkoske.

SCEP is a recruiting tool for current college students to be placed in full- or part-time student trainee positions related

to their educational program. After completing the program, students are eligible to be offered the opportunity for non-competitive conversion to an intern position.

"Just in those two programs alone, we have over 600 individuals, so those programs will continue to be a big part of our strategy," said Penkoske.

Workforce Development Programs

Recruiting talented people is just the first phase of a tandem attack for agency development. DISA then focuses on refining that talent with its professional development programs for all levels of the workforce.

"We are always expanding our leadership programs—developing leadership skills among our workforce starting at the entry level. We have formal programs now for our more junior employees, including our Emerging Leaders Program, and we have our Executive Leadership Development Program for our GS-13s through 15s," said Penkoske. DISA is continuing to ensure the programs are going to stay relevant as the strategies and vision of the agency change, he added.

Recruiting and Retention

Then, there's retention—a challenge within itself, but doubly so when coupled with BRAC. While there are outreach efforts in place, it's a tall order to maintain a workforce during a relocation. Penkoske cites communication and information as key to maximize retention.

"We're doing a lot of things to communicate to [the workforce]. We have town hall meetings with them on a regular basis to explain things to them. The state of Maryland has been great about coming down here, holding meetings with the workforce to give them information on housing, transportation, schools. We've had field trips to Fort Meade on a regular basis so the workforce can actually see the construction site where their new home will be," said Penkoske. "We've been doing all those kinds of things to make it attractive so that, hopefully, a real significant portion of our workforce is going to go with us." In additional efforts to keep lines of communication open among the DISA workforce, BRAC kiosks were recently installed at DISA's facilities in the Washington, D.C., area to provide the workforce with ongoing information on things such as housing, schools, and transportation in the Maryland area.

Workforce Development Funds

With the majority of the agency's workforce being in the science and information technology fields, DISA can also use its recruitment and retention advantage: the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act. The act establishes the Defense Acquisition Workforce Development Fund for DoD agencies to recruit and retain its acquisition, technology, and logistics workforce. DISA has pledged to be more aggressive in using the funds in fiscal year 2009.

Currently, DISA's acquisition civilian workforce makes up approximately 8 percent of the DISA overall workforce. In addition to using the funds for recruitment and retention bonus, the agency is planning to hire 10 interns and 10 journeyman positions a year for its acquisition workforce—a hiring action it intends to continue through fiscal year 2012. Including fiscal year 2008 initiatives, that will create a total of 50 interns and 50 journeyman positions by 2012.

DISA has also established an awards program to recognize contributions to excellence in the acquisition workforce. DISA envisions that the program will motivate and enhance retention within its acquisition workforce community.

DISA's Manpower, Personnel, and Security Directorate is in the process of meeting with other organizations of the agency to get input that will ensure funds are used effectively and efficiently. Because the fund has only recently been established, DISA, in efforts to fully understand and appropriately apply the funds to its workforce, is also working closely with the Defense Acquisition University (the fund's executive agent) and other defense agencies to ensure it can capitalize on the fund in a consistent manner. The agency will then refine program planning, as appropriate, based on any changing requirements and successful program initiatives.

"We have put the requirement in on what we believe we need. We're anxiously awaiting the decision on the funding that DISA is going to get to take advantage of that," said Penkoske.

BRAC Planning

So, what's the retention goal for the move to Fort Meade? The agency would like 100-percent retention, and while they know it's an unrealistic goal, DISA pursues it with a robust BRAC Human Resources Plan that carries quite a few incentives to make staying with DISA as attractive as possible for employees.

"We're going to pay their [permanent change of station costs], which we think will help with a lot of things. We have different kinds of entitlements we can use on a case-by-case basis. We helped work with [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] to get a change in the retention allowance authority for now for BRAC-impacted agencies. We keep trying to look at other flexibilities that we can get," said Penkoske.

Those flexibilities include spousal employment placement assistance, transportation options, and partnering with Maryland colleges and universities to leverage educational opportunities.

Educational opportunities will prove beneficial as DISA puts emphasis on workforce planning, evaluating the trends, and predicting the subsequent needs of the agency before they present themselves. Part of the emphasis is on identifying

the new skills that are relevant to the progressive change of the agency.

"Sometimes I think that, in the past, organizations or agencies may have fallen into a trap," said Penkoske. "If you lose an engineer [position], then you fill it with the same kind of engineer. If you lose a computer scientist, then you fill it with the same kind of computer scientist. But what we are trying to do—and we still have a way to go—is not just to say, 'Well, we know we're going to lose some engineers or computer scientists,' but what is the skill we need or is it a different kind of skill based on the changes in technology and on where the agency is headed? How do we have to adjust and bring in somebody with different and new types of skills?"

Knowledge Transfer and Management

Along with workforce planning and identifying the new, relevant skill sets, DISA is using and retaining the existing wisdom available to the agency directly from its workforce. Penkoske calls it knowledge transfer and management. And maintaining that institutional knowledge is equally critical as retaining the workforce itself.

"How do you make sure that institutional knowledge is transferred from one generation of your workforce to the next? The solution for that isn't that you just put everything out on a Web site and then people can just look at it," Penkoske said. "There are maybe some intangible things, like how do you transfer leadership skills? Some of that may be by mentoring and shadowing. How do you transfer what I call wisdom? There's a big difference between technical experience and knowledge and then wisdom. So, that whole area—and we're probably not as sophisticated as we need to be, but we've at least identified it—how do you make sure that you have an orderly transition of that knowledge?"

"Although it may sound obvious, one of the things you have to do upfront is to identify what knowledge you need to keep," Penkoske added.

The numerous awards DISA has received related to its human capital initiatives imply a certain level of success in these programs. Penkoske attributes such success to moving into the implementation phase quickly.

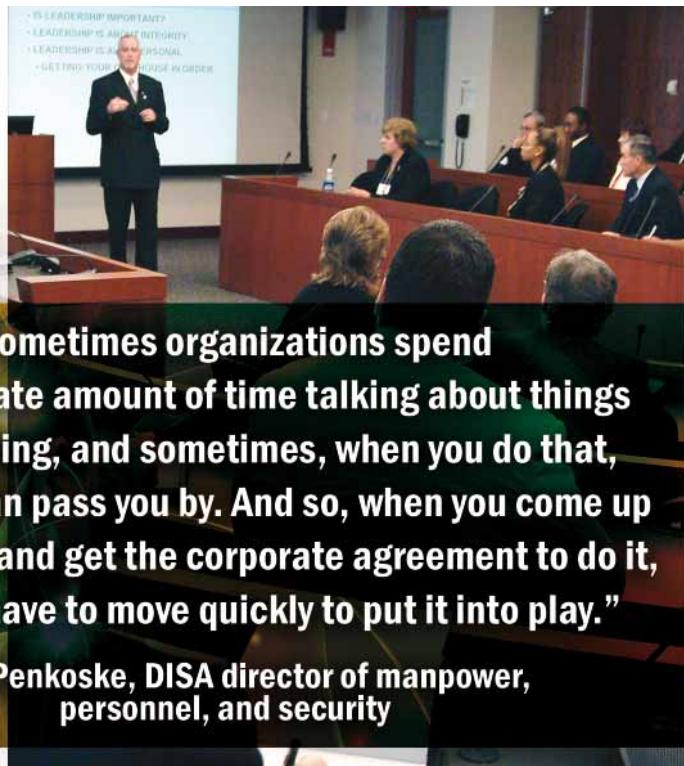
"Sometimes organizations spend an inordinate amount of time talking about things and planning, and sometimes, when you do that, the world can pass you by. And so, when you come up with an idea and get the corporate agreement to do it, then you have to move quickly to put it into play," said Penkoske. "You have to put an idea into place, and then

you can expand it after that. That's where I think DISA has been fairly successful—in putting the programs in place pretty quickly and then adjusting them and leveraging resources."

The Future

With so many exciting current programs taking place at DISA, it begs the question: What's the next human capital initiative for the agency?

"I'm not going to tip the hand," Penkoske said, smiling. "There are some things that I think are pretty close to coming to fruition."



tion and that I think are really going to help our workforce. Some of them will only impact a small niche—a small group of people—but I think those are important too."

Although BRAC is a top priority for DISA, Penkoske was quick to emphasize that all the human capital programs are available to the DISA workforce worldwide. And still, expansion will continue to play a commanding role in DISA's strategies for human capital management.

"We want to stay more aggressive in being proactive, in assessing what our needs are going to be for the future, and in staying ahead of the power curve on that," said Penkoske.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at corporatecommunications@disa.mil.